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MAISON GÉNÉRALE O.M.I.

290, Via Aurelia, 290

BISHOP JEAN-LOUIS COUDERT

An old-country Frenchman who evangelized the north

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council formally mourned Whitehorse's Bishop Jean-Louis Coudert when he died in Rome. Vancouver writer Kay Cronin, author of *Cross in the Wilderness*, tells the story of Bishop Coudert's contribution to British Columbia and the Yukon.

BY KAY CRONIN

The sudden death in Rome of the first Vicar Apostolic of Whitehorse has deprived the Church in western Canada of its one remaining old-time missionary bishop and brings to a close an era of spiritual trailblazing unmatched in the rigor of its demands upon the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Like so many « giants » among the western Oblate pioneers, Bishop Jean-Louis Coudert, O.M.I., was an old-country Frenchman who dedicated the whole of his priestly life to the evangelisation of the Indians and early settlers in the Mackenzie, the Yukon and northern British Columbia.

Just a week before this ailing 70-year-old prelate departed on his final missionary journey — to attend the closing sessions of Vatican II — I happened to be up in the Yukon. And while I was there the bishop invited me to dinner.

We were long-time friends, and this was my first visit to his territory. And it was typical of his thoughtfulness to highlight my trip with such an invitation.

I hadn't seen him since he suffered a heart attack last year and subsequently resigned as Vicar Apostolic.

Meatime there had been many rumours about his possible successor.

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As the local Oblates had forewarned me, I found the bishop looking frail and a little slower in step than he used to be. But I was delighted to find that his spirit was as bouncy as ever.

« Say, have you heard any rumours about my successor? » was the first thing he asked me.

I smiled. « That's just what I was hoping to find out from you », I told him.

And we both chuckled like a couple of conspirators over this exchange of Oblate « gossip ».

At 8 p.m. that evening I was scheduled to speak to the Catholic Women's League. When I arrived at the parish hall I was dumbfounded to learn that the bishop had insisted on coming to the meeting in order to introduce me himself. Not only that, he stayed throughout my talk and asked many questions afterwards. True, I was speaking on a subject very dear to his heart — the Indian people — but I was deeply touched that the bishop would tax himself to this extent in order to welcome a guest to his vicariate. But, again, this was so typical of his old-world graciousness.

I was invited to visit the bishop again the following day « to talk over old times »

« Come whenever you like, whenever it's convenient to you » he insisted. And then he added with a grin, « ... except between one-thirty and three; as you can guess, I'm usually 'horizontal' during those hours ».

I said I would come at ten-thirty next morning.

The bishop answered the door himself and took me along to his study.

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He settled himself in an easy chair, lighted one of his favourite cigars, and started to reminisce about « the old days ».

Because he knew I was familiar with the territory, he concentrated on his early missionary travels in central and northern B.C. In 1936, when he was elected coadjutor to Bishop Emile Bunoz, OMI, the vicariates of Prince Rupert and the Yukon were all one and covered well over a quarter of a million square miles of rugged wilderness.

Although the bishop had never been this far west before, he had already spent 14 years as an Indian missionary in the Mackenzie vicariate and was an old hand at travelling the hard way. In those days he would think nothing of walking 20 miles a day through the roughest terrain. There were no roads or cars and seldom even a horse to spare at that time. He travelled mostly by dugout canoe, or on foot, camping out each night in all kinds of weather.

He told me about his first trip into the Rocky Mountain Trench, which took four weeks by dugout canoe. «I never saw so many moose as when I was on that trip», he said.

One night, near Fort Graham, when he and his Indian guides were camped out on the river bank he counted eighteen moose on the brow of a nearby hill, stomping and snorting and charging around. «It was the one time in my life I was scared of moose», the bishop admitted. «I thought that any minute they'd come charging down the river bank and trample us all underfoot».

This was the trip the bishop had taken following his consecration in June, 1936, and while he was waiting to get through to Prince Rupert. There was a bad flood in the north country that year and the railway line from Prince George to Prince Rupert was washed out for three months.

It wasn't until August 15th that he arrived in Prince Rupert to celebrate his first Pontifical High Mass.

«And guess who my altar boy was», he asked with a smile. I shook my head. «Larry Turgeon», he told me. (That altar boy was to become the Vicariate's first

vocation to the diocesan priesthood; he is now pastor of Notre Dame parish in Dawson Creek).

« The Fathers here put on a bit of a celebration for my 70th birthday this year, and Larry came all the way from Dawson Creek to share that occasion with me. I appreciated that so much, so much... »

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One of the many journeys the bishop described that morning was a two-week trip he took with Father John Hennessy, OMI, then a young Indian missionary in the Cariboo district (now pastor of St. Peter's parish, New Westminster). « That was one of the most interesting trips of my life », said the bishop. « I met Father Hennessy in Quespel and we travelled for two weeks together on horseback ... preaching missions at every Indian settlement ... Nazco ... Ulkatcho ... Kluskus ... along the valley, through the mountains — and in all that time we saw only one white man, a Russian who had a small trading post in there ».

Following their visit to the Kluskus tribe, the bishop, Father Hennessy and their Indian guides set off on borrowed horses for the next reserve, a day's journey away. As they were preparing camp that night the guides shot two moose to supply their party with food and to take some to the next village when they went. They were just retiring for the night when they heard the sound of horses approaching. They looked up to find a hundred members of the Kluskus tribe who had decided on the spur of the moment to join them at the next village. All they had brought with them in the way of food supplies was some black tea and bannock (Indian bread).

The next day was Friday and the bishop told the chief he would grant a dispensation so that the Indians could have some moose meat. « But the chief said 'No! We will fish for our food!' » said the bishop. « And that's what they did. In no time at all the

river bank was a mass of rainbow trout, speckled trout, all kinds of fish — plenty to feed all those hundred people ».

« How I admire the Indians' trust in Divine Providence », mused the bishop. « Can you imagine the kind of fuss white people would make if they suddenly had to organize a picnic for a hundred people? They would have to have all kinds of committees, weeks of preparation, and they'd end up with enough food to feed a thousand »!

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A bell sounded somewhere in the house, breaking into his reverie. It was close to noon, and this was October 4th — the day Pope Paul was coming to New York to address the United Nations Assembly.

I prepared to leave, knowing the bishop would want to hear the radio broadcast of Pope Paul's speech, scheduled to start at twelve.

« No, no, stay a while longer », said the bishop. « I have heard the Pope many times in Rome », he commented with a smile, « but it is only once that you have come to Whitehorse ». And he insisted that I stay.

When I finally left, the bishop accompanied me to the door. But just before we got there he suddenly turned back. « I think I left the light on », he muttered, and returned to his study.

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When he came back, the bishop took my arm as we slowly walked towards the front door, and for the umpteenth time that morning he said, with a sigh, « Ah yes, Kay, times have changed! These days, so many people take so much for granted. Just switch on the light, and you can have as much light as ever you want. They don't think twice about it. Yet I recall so well when we missionaries were rationed to two

candles a week, and that was all we had for all the light we needed for seven days and nights ».

When I got to the bottom of the rectory steps I turned to wave goodbye to this grand old Oblate pioneer, wondering to myself when, or indeed if, I would ever see him again.

Perhaps he could guess my thoughts. At any rate, his last words to me were: « Goodbye now and God bless you for coming. I'll come to see you in Vancouver when I'm on my way back from Rome. In any case, keep praying for me, won't you »?

THE B.C. CATHOLIC, *November 18, 1965*

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